

Mending Wall

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Mending Wall

by [lostmagician](#)

Summary

Post Season 2. After Miguel wakes up from his coma, Robby moves in with his father and embarks on a journey to redeem himself.

Notes

A remix of one of my favorite stories in fandom.

- Inspired by [Love Letter](#) by [GenKay](#)

Chapter 1

They were fighting outside the car. Johnny's forehead furrowed in anger, Carmen's eyes shining through her tear-streaked face. Robby watched them from the passenger seat, his leg jiggling in the footwell. They'd been arguing for ten minutes, every now and then gesturing in his direction.

Robby hated it. It felt like he was six years old all over again, and his parents were fighting over a teacher's note.

Except this time, it was worse. So much worse. He'd cranked up the radio just so he could drown out the sound of their angry voices. He only heard bits and pieces until Carmen stomped her heel on the ground and her words pierced through the window, clear as day.

“Miguel almost died!”

Robby sank into his seat. What had he gotten himself into? He never should have called his dad in the first place, but he'd been so desperate. He'd seen on the news that Miguel had woken up from his coma and after weeks of deep-seated dread, it had been enough to fill him with renewed hope. He'd honestly thought things were going to be okay.

Now he was seriously considering making a break for it. He looked around the car: the door was unlocked, and there were enough coins in the cup holder to buy him a bus ticket to San Diego. All he needed was a head start and an impulse to run. His fingers inched closer to the cup holder, when the passenger door jerked open.

Johnny stood there with his plaid shirt and bushy beard. He nodded his head over his shoulder.

“Come on,” he said gruffly.

Robby searched behind him, but there was no sign of Carmen. He glanced back at Johnny, who had a very serious look on his face. Robby swallowed and climbed out of the car.

The hospital was a large building, three stories and brightly lit on the inside. Johnny led him through the sliding doors, the reception and into the elevator without once asking for directions. An ugly sensation rose in Robby's chest, familiar and all-encompassing, but he quickly squashed it down. Now was not the time for jealousy.

He tapped his fingers against his thigh as he watched the number change on the screen. When the elevator dinged, Johnny stepped out without looking back.

The closer they got to the room, the more Robby got nervous. It's only once they reached the door that the reality of the situation slammed into him.

He was going to see Miguel.

Just as Johnny was about to knock, Robby's hand shot out to grab his elbow.

“Wait,” Robby said, suddenly breathless. “Are you sure this is a good idea? Maybe we should do this another time.”

“What?” Johnny asked, squinting.

“Just—maybe we should give him some time. It's only been four weeks, and he just woke up. He

still needs time to recover, right? He's probably not ready to see me."

More importantly, I'm not ready to see him, he wanted to scream.

Johnny stared at him. "Robby, this is your last chance at making this right." Before Robby could say anything, Johnny cut him off. "No, you listen to me." He dropped his voice. "Miguel almost *died* because of you. Now I'm sure you'd like nothing better than to bury your head in the sand, but that's not gonna happen, not while I'm in the goddamn picture. You're going to get your shit together, go in there and apologize. Am I clear?"

Robby's words died in his throat. Who was this man? The Johnny he knew was a deadbeat dad, a loser, a nobody, and now he was giving Robby life advice? Johnny's eyes darkened, and Robby quickly nodded.

"Okay, let's do this," Johnny said, raising his hand. He knocked on the door and didn't wait for an answer. He swung it open and walked inside. Robby watched him disappear into the room.

Johnny was right. There was no going back now. He had to own up to his mistake, take responsibility for what he did. How could he live with himself otherwise? How could he ever move on? With that thought in mind, he took a deep breath and stepped inside.

His chest tightened at the sight that greeted him.

Carmen stood by the bed with a solemn expression on her face. There were no more traces of tears and she'd tied up her hair in a loose bun.

But it wasn't her that Robby focused on. His eyes slowly moved to the bed, where a figure lay sprawled against the frame.

Shaggy hair, hard set of the jaw. For a second he wished he could look back at Carmen's face, because nothing could compare to the ice cold hatred in Miguel's eyes.

Chapter 2

Robby moved in with Johnny. He didn't have any other choice. Shannon was still in rehab, and he needed a place to stay.

On the first night, Johnny dropped a threadbare pillow and a blanket on the sofa and told him roughly, "Until I get you a proper mattress."

He also lent Robby an old Cobra Kai t-shirt and a pair of too-big sweatpants.

As Robby laid down to sleep, he kept replaying the hospital visit in his head—the coldness in Miguel's eyes, the way he'd stared at Robby like he was lower than dirt. Robby flushed, when he remembered how he'd stumbled over his apology. He was usually good at keeping his composure, but in that moment, he'd broken apart at the seams.

At least Carmen had reacted well. She'd listened with an open mind, occasionally placing a hand on Miguel's shoulder whenever emotion overtook her.

Not for the first time, Robby wondered what kind of a relationship she had with Johnny. He was obviously important enough that he'd convinced her to drop the charges. Were they dating? If so, was it serious?

He thought about his next step. Surely an apology wasn't enough, and apart from going back in time and changing past events, he didn't know else what to do. Also, a lot of other people were still upset with him. He vowed to text Sam the next morning.

What about Mr. LaRusso? Robby pushed away the thought and fell into a fitful sleep.

It was strange living with his dad. They hadn't lived together since he was a small kid, and even then the nights were irregular and far in-between. Now, they were talking over breakfast, sharing a bathroom and taking turns making coffee.

They were also fighting a lot. Over trivial things like who finished the last of the milk, where did the car keys go, and *no Dad, for the last time I did not break the Internet*. Sometimes, they ended up arguing with each other until they were red in the face, and one of them needed to step outside to cool off.

But eventually, it got better. Johnny started to leave the house every afternoon for a few hours, which gave Robby space for himself.

During that time, Robby tried to keep himself busy around the house by cooking, exercising and watching TV. He discovered a library a few blocks away, so he picked up reading too. He ran into Carmen outside a few times, sometimes with Miguel in tow. It was painful and awkward, and Robby wished the ground would swallow him whole. He thought she'd be fine with him after the hospital, but the cold attitude threw him off.

When he told Johnny, his dad just rolled his eyes.

"Of course. What did you expect?"

Robby had a bad feeling.

“What do you mean?” He asked slowly.

“She’s a single mom with a full time job and a crippled son,” Johnny said, opening a can of beer. “She’s got better things to do than be nice with you.”

Robby went silent. He hadn’t thought about it. He’d been so worried that she hated him, that he’d never considered anything else.

So, the next time he saw Carmen outside, he paused at the door and watched her.

The first thing he noticed was that she was still wearing her scrubs. She was grabbing groceries from the trunk of her car and carrying them to her apartment, back and forth. Her hair was disheveled, her lips pressed tight, and there were bags under her eyes.

She looked *tired*.

The entire time, Robby had been wondering how he could redeem himself, how he could make up for everything that he had done.

This was his answer.

“Would you like some help with that, Mrs. Diaz?”

Carmen looked up in surprise, and her gaze softened.

They said redemption came to those who wait. Robby acted like his clock was running out. Now that he knew what he had to do, he threw himself head-long into his new endeavor.

Every day like clockwork, he went over to the Diaz’ door and volunteered to carry groceries, take out the trash, clean the car. Carmen refused at first, too polite to take him up on his offer, but Robby put on his best puppy dog eyes and persisted until she said yes.

He met her mother Rosa, a dark-haired woman who spoke mostly Spanish with a few words in English. Robby hadn’t taken Spanish since seventh grade and he had a crush on Maria next door, so he only understood half of what she said.

She seemed nice and caring, like she was willing to give Robby a chance. Though he considered brushing up on his Spanish after he mistook her asking him for weed.

And then there was Miguel. Robby hardly saw him some days. He was always moving between doctor’s appointments and physical therapy. When he was home, he was usually hiding in his room, only coming out when his mom called him for a meal or his friends came over.

He didn’t show much emotion. He tensed whenever Robby talked to him or stood too close, but otherwise his expression remained blank. It made Robby worry that he was overstepping. He asked Carmen one night after picking up a prescription for Miguel.

“No, Miguel just needs time... to adjust. He’ll get used to it.”

“Okay,” Robby said, not understanding. “I just don’t want him to feel uncomfortable.”

He had no doubt that Miguel had been asking to get rid of him too. Carmen got a strange look on his face.

“Miguel has a big heart, he’ll come around.”

Robby wondered if it had something to do with her relationship with Johnny, or if she was just that confident in her son’s capacity for forgiveness.

Later that evening, he went to the library and took out a book on Spanish. At the last moment, he took one on injury recovery too.

Chapter 3

Robby tried his best to be helpful and polite, but it didn't matter. He could die in a smoggy pit, and Miguel wouldn't bat an eyelash.

It seemed Miguel had thought Robby's presence was only temporary at first. Once he realized Robby was here to stay, his behavior changed drastically. He did everything in his power to make Robby feel unwelcome.

Like making it a point to speak with his mom in Spanish whenever Robby was around. Talking to Johnny about memories that only the two of them shared, so that Robby felt excluded from the conversation. He had a way of finding Robby's weak points and zeroing in on them, making snide comments about emo boys and juvenile delinquents.

Robby knew Miguel wasn't going to forgive him easily, but he didn't expect this level of anger. He could see it boiling beneath the surface, like lava waiting to erupt.

He took it in stride and concentrated on the positive. Miguel was finally doing progress. He'd moved his feet for the first time during a training session with Johnny.

Wasn't that all that mattered?

The war on Cobra Kai wasn't over. Johnny had reached a truce with Mr. LaRusso, and they were finally working on a way to take down Kreese.

One night, Johnny asked Robby if he wanted to join the new dojo.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Robby said uncertainly. They were sitting on the sofa, watching a rerun of MacGyver. Robby wasn't the biggest fan, but it was the only thing they could agree on.

Johnny's arms were crossed over his chest, his eyes fixed on the TV. "Is it LaRusso you're worried about?"

The question took Robby by surprise.

"He told me you've been ignoring his calls," Johnny added, raising an eyebrow at him.

Robby felt a tremor of unease. He hadn't meant for it to reach this point. At first, he'd been too afraid to face him, but as time had passed, the fear had turned into guilt and now he could barely scroll past Mr. LaRusso's name on his phone without panicking.

But it wasn't just that...

"No," Robby said, and it was only a half-lie. How could you explain to his dad all the feelings inside of him? He settled for saying, "I'm just not ready yet."

Johnny nodded. If he looked a little relieved, Robby didn't call him out on it.

It took a while for Robby to figure it out. The issue was that he never spent one-on-one time with Miguel. Sure, Robby helped by heating up food, opening doors and fetching painkillers, but there

was always someone else around, ready to swoop in if things got out of hand.

If he wanted Miguel to forgive him, Robby needed to find a way to connect with him. It was the only way their relationship could grow.

The perfect opportunity came up on a Wednesday morning. Miguel had a doctor's appointment at one o'clock, but there was nobody to drive him. Carmen had a double shift at work, Johnny was busy with Mr. LaRusso, and Rosa didn't have her driver's license.

"I can take him," Robby said, perking up from the sofa.

"Yeah?" Johnny asked, uncertain. He exchanged glances with Carmen. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Robby said firmly.

Carmen turned to Miguel, who was sitting in his wheelchair. "*Estás bien con eso, Miggy?*"

Miguel's jaw tightened. He looked like he'd rather get stabbed by knives.

"Do I have a choice?" Miguel said, only confirming Robby's thoughts.

So, at midday, they got ready to go. Carmen dropped off Johnny at Miyagi-Do, and Robby was given the Dodge Caravan. It was ugly and bulky, but it got the job done.

It was awkward getting into the car. Robby had to help Miguel into the passenger seat, sliding his arms around his stiff torso and carrying him inside. Miguel stayed tense the entire time, making the task more difficult. Robby made sure his legs were properly stretched in the footwell, his seatbelt secured. Then, he folded the wheelchair and packed it in the trunk.

The drive was silent and tense. Robby bit his lip, unsure of what to say.

"So... how's physical therapy going?"

For a moment, he thought that Miguel wasn't going to answer. The silence stretched out, and Robby's stomach churned in embarrassment.

After what seemed like an eternity, Miguel shrugged.

"Good."

It seemed he wasn't going to say more, and they fell back into awkward silence. Why did Robby think this was a good idea?

He scrambled his mind for another question.

"What music do you—"

"Stop talking," Miguel said.

Robby snapped his mouth shut. When they arrived to the hospital, he let out a breath of relief.

"I'll be back soon," Miguel said, after Robby helped him back into his wheelchair.

"Okay, sure. Let me..." he reached out to push him, but Miguel had already rolled away on his own.

Robby dropped his hands to his sides. *Okay.* He nodded to himself and returned to the car. The sight of the hospital was making him feel queasy. It reminded him of sleepless nights at the shelter, staring at the cracked ceiling, wondering if Miguel was dead or alive.

As he settled into his seat, he tried to push away the feeling. He didn't realize it would be this hard. He thought that helping Miguel would lessen the guilt inside of him. Instead, it was a constant battle to keep his head afloat.

Robby sighed and fetched a book from his bag. He turned to his bookmark and started reading.

An hour and a half later, his stomach was growling. It was past lunch time, and he'd skipped breakfast in the morning. How long was a PT session supposed to last anyway?

He took out his phone and texted Miguel.

Hey, you finishing up soon?

Robby bit his lip and pressed on Send. His leg shook in the footwell, as he waited for a reply. *Come on, come on.* But the message stayed on Unread. He put down his phone and stared off into the distance. There was no sign of Miguel.

He tried to read a bit longer, but his mind started filling with images, each one worst than the one before. Miguel, getting stuck in the elevator. Miguel, falling off his wheelchair. Miguel, having a stroke in the bathroom and not being able to call for help. He picked up his phone again and called this time. The line rang, but nobody picked up.

By now, Robby's heart was racing in his chest. He fumbled with the handle and climbed out of the car, heading toward the building. The lady at the front desk refused to give him any information about Miguel's whereabouts. She didn't care that he was worried or having a mini panic attack. Robby went back into the parking lot and looked around.

It wasn't a joke anymore. What if something had really happened to Miguel? What if he'd come across the wrong people? He was in a wheelchair for God's sake. If somebody wanted to hurt him, they could have easily overpowered him.

And whose fault is that? A little voice piped up in his head. *Who's the one who put him in the wheelchair?*

He scrolled through his contacts until he reached Johnny's name. Fuck, his dad was going to *kill* him. Robby was about to press on Call, when he heard the sound of metal squeaking behind him. He whipped around.

It was Miguel, rolling leisurely across the parking lot.

"Where were you?" Robby asked, pissed.

"I got hungry," Miguel shrugged, and surely enough, there was a milkshake tucked between his thighs. Robby looked into the distance. There was a Wendy's next door.

How long had Miguel been sitting at the diner, while Robby had been out here stressing out, thinking he'd lost him.

How long?

“Gonna help me back into the car?” Miguel asked, raising an eyebrow. His face was smug and itching to be punched.

Robby gritted his teeth and jerked the door open.

Chapter 4

Time flew by, and soon it was September, the start of the school year.

Johnny sat Robby down to discuss his options: return to North Hills High, find a new school that would accept him or enroll in distance e-learning. Johnny said the last part, slow and drawn-out, which made Robby suspect it was Mr. LaRusso's idea in the first place.

Robby tried hard not to think about that. He focused on Johnny's question, but he didn't have to mull it over for long. The answer was a no-brainer. He couldn't imagine going back to school with all the rumors going around.

The online classes started out simple, but by the end of the first week, he had enough homework to keep him busy every night.

It's how he ended up studying at the Diaz' dining table one Thursday evening. Carmen had to work the night shift, Rosa had a dinner with a friend, so Robby offered to stay around in case Miguel needed anything.

Miguel, who was currently eating Chinese food in front of the TV. Once again he hadn't bothered to ask Robby if he was hungry, just picked up the phone and ordered enough items off the menu to pig out by himself.

He'd also turned up the sound to an uncomfortable level.

"Can you please put down the volume?" Robby asked loudly. "I can barely hear myself think with all the racket."

"No," Miguel said, eyes on the screen.

Robby pursed his lips and watched the TV for a few minutes. It was an obnoxious reality show about people stranded on an island. He couldn't imagine people willingly putting themselves in such a situation, where they would jeopardize their safety for a few extra bucks. It was really dumb.

"Why the hell are you even watching this?" Robby asked.

"Because I like it."

"Really? Is that it or are you just trying to piss me off so I'll leave."

Miguel turned angry eyes on him. "Hey, nobody asked you to be here."

"I came here to help you, asshole," Robby snapped back.

Robby had been the one to open the door for the delivery for God's sake. Miguel scoffed and turned back to the TV, stuffing a wonton into his mouth.

"Can you at least put the volume down a little?" Robby asked, annoyed.

Miguel ignored him. Robby huffed and returned his focus to the textbook. He didn't understand how Miguel could waste so much time in the day. His friends regularly sent him notes from class, but Robby had yet to see him crack open a book.

How was he going to graduate this way? Didn't he have plans for college? Robby shook his head and picked up his pen. He was calculating the arithmetic mean in a sequence when—

“Shit,” Miguel exclaimed. “Shit— shit— shit!” Robby’s head whipped up. Miguel had spilled wonton soup all over his lap, and his arms were flailing, trying to contain the mess.

Robby got up and walked over.

“Are you okay?”

“Do I look okay?” Miguel yelled, his voice breaking. He searched around him, grabbed the remote and jammed his finger on the power button.

The voices on the TV died down, plunging the room into silence.

Miguel looked genuinely upset, his chest heaving as he stared down at his lap. Holding back a sigh, Robby went to fetch a towel from the kitchen. Miguel took it and started to wipe himself down, but his hands were shaking too much, making the task almost impossible.

He stopped and glared down at his clenched fists. It was enough to break Robby’s resolve.

“Here let me...” Robby said, inching closer. He sank down to his knees and took the towel gently from Miguel’s hands.

“I don’t *need*—” Miguel started to say, but he bit back his tongue and looked away.

I don’t need your help.

Robby’s chest ached. He cleaned Miguel as best as he could with broad strokes of the towel, all along his thighs, but the liquid had seeped through his pants.

“Let’s go to the bathroom,” Robby said, standing up. He leaned forward and caught Miguel by the waist, transferring him to his wheelchair. He was used to the solid weight by now, having helped him move multiple times. He pushed Miguel toward the hallway, and it was a testament to Miguel’s anger that he didn’t object.

The bathroom was small, but Robby managed to squeeze in with Miguel in the wheelchair. He grabbed a pair of pants that were hung behind the door and leaned down.

Miguel stiffened. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you get changed,” Robby said, wrapping his arm around Miguel’s torso and lifting him up from the wheelchair. Miguel’s hands scrabbled for purchase on his back, fingers digging into his shirt.

With his other hand, Robby pulled down his pants. The position was awkward, with his face so close to Miguel’s crotch. He averted his gaze and tried to keep his actions as perfunctory as possible. He passed a washcloth under warm water and wiped down Miguel’s thighs. It felt strangely vulnerable, seeing the dark hairs feathered against tan skin.

He considered making a joke to lighten the mood, but decided against it. It didn’t feel right, especially when Miguel’s whole body was trembling. Robby dressed him up, first one foot then the other. Then, he held up Miguel again and pulled the waistband over his hips.

When he was done, Miguel’s lips were white and tightly pressed together. He didn’t thank Robby

or acknowledge him in any way.

Robby didn't know whether to be annoyed or relieved.

Chapter 5

The sun beamed down on him and a cool breeze ruffled through his hair. Robby looked up from his book, to where Miguel was making his way across the courtyard.

It had been a month since Miguel's release from the hospital. He'd made progress, but not as fast as Robby had expected. He was still walking at a snail's pace—every step slow and heavy like it took him all his energy to raise his leg. Johnny held onto Miguel's arms, goading him on with low encouragements, and pausing every now and then to let him catch his breath.

It was odd seeing his dad so soft. He'd never thought Johnny could be a good teacher, since the few times he'd offered to teach Robby karate as a kid had ended in anger, tears and disappointment. To see all this softness directed at Miguel was jarring.

Miguel, who still hadn't warmed up to Robby.

After weeks of baiting and passive-aggressive behavior, Miguel's anger was showing no sign of subsiding. He continued to pick on Robby, doing everything possible to make his life miserable. To be honest, Robby was getting tired of the attitude. He thought of himself as a resilient person, but even he had his limits.

If he had a choice, he'd be skipping these training sessions altogether. He didn't know why Johnny insisted on having him present. It's not like he was of any use anyway. Well, except for one thing...

"Is it just me or is it hot?" Miguel asked, blinking sweat out of his eyes.

"Robby, go get Miguel a towel," Johnny said absently.

Robby held back a sigh and put down his book. It wasn't the first time he'd been reneged to the role of bellboy. He was sure that Miguel was doing it on purpose—some new way to get back at Robby without outright confronting him. Johnny, of course, didn't notice anything wrong.

He went into the apartment, got a terry-cloth from the bathroom and brought it outside.

Miguel wiped his forehead. Then, he cleared his throat and pulled a face. "I'm actually kinda thirsty too."

"Robby," Johnny said on queue.

He muttered under his breath all the way inside. They didn't have anything except beer or soda in the fridge, so he headed to Miguel's apartment and got a bottle of water.

Miguel's face fell at the sight. "Couldn't you get a Gatorade or something?"

He was doing that fake sad look that Robby hated. The one that Robby had recognized as *You're my bitch now*. Robby felt annoyance shoot through his chest. How much longer were they going to continue this charade? He went inside, got a bottle of Gatorade from the fridge. Went back outside, all but shoved it in Miguel's hand.

Miguel choked when he took a sip.

"Hey, you okay?" Johnny asked, crowding closer to him. He took the bottle from his hand.

"Yeah, sorry," Miguel said, massaging his throat. "I didn't expect it to be so cold."

Are you fucking kidding me?

Johnny's jaw went tight. He turned around. "Robby, go get another—"

Robby snatched the bottle and turned on his heel. He could feel Johnny's glare all the way back to the apartment. He slammed the door shut, went to the sink and upended the bottle angrily into the drain, before throwing it down. He pressed his hands against the counter and hunched his shoulders.

He had a full view of the courtyard from the Diaz' kitchen window. Miguel and Johnny had returned to the lesson, though he could see that his dad was still angry. His jaw was set tight, his shoulders stiff. Robby was going to get hell for his actions later, but he didn't care.

He was sick of the mind games. When was Miguel going to cut him some slack? Robby cooked, cleaned, ran errands. He also did things that were *way* out of his scope.

Like the other day, when they were at mall and Miguel had needed the bathroom. He couldn't unzip himself with his trembling fingers, so Robby had offered to help him. It had been awkward and embarrassing, but Robby had sucked it up. He was trying his best to make up for what he'd done. Couldn't Miguel see that?

He almost died because of you, the voice sneered inside of him. And you're pissed because he can't do shit on his own?

Just like that, the anger snuffed out of him.

His chest tightened, the way it always did when he remembered how close Miguel had been to dying. Fuck, he'd been *so close*. If he'd fallen a bit to the left, his head would have hit the railing and then where would he be now?

Robby was so lost in thought that he almost missed the sound of a car rolling into the driveway. Miguel looked up, his shaggy hair flying. Robby held his breath, as a tall figure came into view. It was Tory. She looked dressed to kill, in faded jeans and a yellow crop top. There was a look of discomfort on Miguel's face, that quickly cleared up when she hugged him.

There was a sound of footsteps next to him, followed by the unmistakable smell of weed. Rosa leaned against the counter and stared out the window.

"Ay, ay, ay," Rosa said wistfully. "*Linda pareja.*"

Robby raised his eyebrows in question. He understood *linda*, but not the rest.

She nodded her head in their direction. "Cute couple," in a heavy accent.

That made him see red all over again.

"She's the one who started the fight," Robby snapped.

Rosa's eyes widened in surprise, and Robby looked back outside, satisfied that she understood. Tory was just as much to blame as he was. Why wasn't she getting any of the heat?

Realizing he might have divulged too much, he clenched his jaw and went to get a bottle from the cupboard.

Chapter 6

It wasn't long before Miguel started using crutches. It was hard and taxing on his body, especially when his hands still shook with the slightest effort. But it was right on track with his progress sheet.

As a result, he became moodier, more aggressive. He pushed against Robby whenever he walked by, a not-so-accidental shove of the shoulder that left him bruised for days. He "forgot" his crutches on the living room floor, so that Robby tripped on them all afternoon.

Robby made an effort to keep it cool, but it was hard. He didn't understand how Miguel could be so mean.

Carmen had once mentioned therapy sessions at the hospital. *He's working on his feelings*, she'd told him. *He has a journal*. Robby saw Miguel sometimes, hunched over the kitchen table, scribbling furiously in a notebook. Is that what he was doing? Writing about his feelings?

How was that going to help him walk again?

Sunday night, he was getting ready for bed when his phone pinged with a message from Miguel.

I'm hungry.

Robby sighed from where he was laying comfortably in bed. His head was aching, his eyes stinging from exhaustion. He'd been up since eight o'clock in the morning studying for a math exam.

But of course, Miguel knew that already. That was the whole point, wasn't it? Robby briefly considered ignoring him, but finally decided against it. It was his fault that Miguel couldn't get his own food in the first place.

He sighed again, got out of bed and slipped on his clothes.

Half an hour later, he was waiting in line at the cashier, fuming as he held a bag of chips and a coke. The idea that Miguel had woken him for something so futile—couldn't he have eaten something from the fridge?—it was ridiculous.

Miguel stood a few feet away, leaning against his crutches, oblivious as ever. Robby stared daggers at the back of his head, deciding that next time he was ignoring the asshole.

"Aww, if it isn't Rhea!" A voice called out from across the store.

Robby turned around, frowning. It was a dark-haired guy, dressed in designer jeans and a black sweatshirt. He was walking toward them with a smirk on his face. Robby felt a wave of unease wash over him.

It took him a few seconds to register that the guy was talking to Miguel.

"Leave me alone, Kyler," Miguel said with hunched shoulders.

"Weave me awone Kywer," the guy repeated in a baby voice, stopping in front of him. "Didn't think I'd see you on your feet again. We were sure you were done for."

Miguel hummed, before turning razor-sharp eyes to Kyler. “Disappointed?”

“Not really,” Kyler said, smiling. “More like excited I’m finally gonna get to kick your ass.”

Miguel scoffed. “Don’t count on that.”

“Why not?”

“You’re a shit fighter.”

“Things have changed,” Kyler said, flashing a cocky smile. “Back then, I hadn’t unlocked my full potential yet.”

“Potential for what? Getting dumped? You’ll never be as good as me, asshole.”

“Oh you see, that’s where you’re wrong,” Kyler said, drawing closer. His foot neared the bottom of Miguel’s crutch, making Robby’s neck prickle. “Kreese says I’m a better student than you ever were.”

Robby went still, and so did Miguel.

What the hell?

“Oh, didn’t you know?” Kyler said gleefully. “I’m Cobra Kai now.”

And then he kicked Miguel’s crutch. Robby caught him before he could hit the floor. His face was pale, and his breath ragged. Robby straightened him up and held him close.

“Are you okay?” He asked Miguel.

Kyler turned to Robby. “And who are you?”

Robby looked at him and clenched his jaw. He wanted to snap this guy’s neck.

“Fuck off,” he growled.

Kyler raised an unimpressed eyebrow. Then, he scanned Robby from head to toe, and his face lit up with realization.

“Wait, are you—” Kyler squinted at Robby, before breaking out in manic laughter. “Are you the guy that kicked Rhea off the balcony? Oh shit, are you two boyfriends now?”

Miguel pulled away from Robby. “I’m not hungry anymore,” he said, pushing past the both of them. He crutched his way out the door.

“You’re an asshole, you know that?” Robby snarled at Kyler. He had a split-second to see Kyler’s smile dim, before he jogged after Miguel.

He was hit with cold air the second he stepped through the door. Miguel was crossing the parking lot, practically dragging his feet with the crutches. Robby ran to catch up with him

“Hey,” Robby called after him. “Miguel.”

Miguel continued walking. Robby lunged forward to grab him by the shoulder.

“Miguel—”

He almost didn't see the punch coming. It grazed his nose, taking his breath away. There was the sound of a crutch falling to the floor, Robby regained his composure and ducked just as a second punch came. It was weaker than the first one, off-center.

Before he could strike again, Robby grabbed him by the arm, stopping him. Miguel shoved against him hard.

"This is your fault," Miguel said with bared teeth. "Your fucking fault—"

"Miguel," Robby said helplessly.

"No!" Miguel screamed, yanking him by the shirt. He'd lost the other crutch, and he was leaning all his weight onto Robby. "Why did you do this to me? I was stronger than you. I was the fucking best. I—"

"Mig—"

"Shut up," Miguel screamed. He swung his arm, and Robby must have stepped back on instinct, because suddenly he was falling back, Miguel collapsing on top of him.

Robby's ears rang as his head hit the asphalt. A hand grasped at the front of his shirt, pulling, and they grappled on the ground. Miguel was so angry, his body twisting on the ground in violent jerks, trying to get a hit. Robby grunted when an elbow connected with his gut. When Miguel twisted again, Robby surged forward and clamped his arms around Miguel's torso, his arms.

"Please stop," Robby begged.

Miguel continued to thrash like a wild animal, struggling against him, throwing his head back.

Robby buried his face in his neck, trying to keep him safe. *Please, please, please.* Then suddenly, Miguel stopped. He screamed though a clenched jaw, an incoherent noise that echoed through the parking lot, and broke down in strong heaves.

His stomach shook under Robby's arms, and he panicked, thinking Miguel was about to vomit, but then a loud sob pierced through the air.

"I'm sorry," Robby said, holding on tight. Miguel was crying, tremors wracking his body. "I'm so sorry."

He didn't want to let go.

Chapter 7

They didn't talk about it. They continued to circle around each other as if nothing had happened.

A week later, Tory stopped coming over, and Robby found out that Miguel had broken up with her. When Robby asked him why, the answer was a growl. *Why? So you can blab to my mom again?*

Robby would have been annoyed, except he had bigger worries on his mind.

Miguel stopped making progress around the third month. He'd started taking bigger steps but was still unable to walk on his own. It bothered Robby more than he cared to admit. He'd read that physical recovery should be linear the first few months after injury. The fact that he'd plateaued after so little time was not normal.

He talked to Johnny and Carmen about it, but they didn't seem worried.

"He'll get there eventually," Carmen said, washing the dishes in the sink. "He just needs time."

Johnny hummed. He was leaning against the counter, his broad shoulders moving as he dried a plate. Robby suspected he agreed, but was reluctant to rock the boat with Carmen.

"But he should be walking without crutches by now," Robby said. It was written in the progress sheet that the physical therapist had given them. "At least a few steps," he added for emphasis.

"Carmen's right," Johnny said, sharing a smile with her. "Everything in its own time."

Robby couldn't believe the words out of his dad's mouth. He held back a sigh and went to the living room.

The problem was the anger. Robby knew a thing or two about it.

Growing up with a deadbeat dad and a drug-addict mom. Sure, Johnny was making an effort now and his mom was in rehab, but the memories lingered. All those nights spent listening to his mother's moans in the next room, years enduring his dad's half-assed attempts to spend time with him. It's what fueled him through his teenage years, taught him how to survive, how to *fight*.

It was the opposite with Miguel. Instead of funneling all his anger into getting stronger, he wallowed in his misery. He sulked around the house like a child. Wasted his days in front of the TV, scarfing down junk food like his body wasn't worth fighting for.

It was unnerving.

Robby remembered Miguel from the All-Valley—the way he'd stood on the mat, his hands formed in fists at his sides, the steel in his eyes. He'd looked like a warrior. That Miguel didn't doubt his ability for a minute, and that's what Robby had admired about him the most.

That Miguel was gone. Now he was an empty shell, a husk of his former self. The anger had dug into him and hollowed him out from the inside out. It was ineffective, wasteful—it's what held him back from true progress.

Carmen was too nice to do anything about it. Robby could understand it to a certain extent: she was a mother after all. Her priority was his comfort, and she didn't want to push him more than he could handle. Johnny would have given him the tough love he deserved, but he was too busy sucking up to Carmen.

So, that only left Robby. Until now, he'd been treating Miguel with kid gloves, too afraid of overstepping his bounds. He realized now how dead wrong he'd been.

Maybe he was the only one who could make a difference.

Robby spent the next few days forming a plan. If Miguel was always angry, maybe all he needed was someone to help him redirect his anger. Teach him to convert it into something more productive. Robby set out to test his theory as soon as possible.

Tuesday afternoon, Miguel was getting ready for a doctor's appointment. There was a bustle in the hallway, the sound of a grunt, and then Miguel was crutching his way into the living room with his shoes loosely on his feet. Carmen finished putting on her earrings and got down on one knee as usual.

Robby's heart raced in his chest, as he watched her tie his shoe laces in quick movements. First, the left, then the right. He waited until she was done, standing up to grab her purse.

"You know what would really help?" Robby asked Carmen. Miguel was waiting at the door, bored. "Velcro shoes."

Miguel's entire body froze. Carmen frowned softly.

"Velcro shoes?" she asked.

"Yeah," Robby said, forcing a smirk. "The one for kids. Easier to take off, easier to put on." He pretended to think, and then nodded in Miguel's direction. "I'm sure they make them for boys his age too."

There was a moment of silence, as Carmen checked her purse. Miguel was holding his crutch so tightly, his hands were shaking. For a moment, Robby was convinced that he was going to say something. Finally let out some of that anger that he was holding in.

"That's a good idea," Carmen said, smiling. "I'll look into it."

Robby plastered a smile on his face. He didn't have time to see the rest of Miguel's reaction. He was already hobbling out the door.

He stressed the rest of the afternoon, wondering if he'd made a mistake. He felt like a grade-A asshole. It was *his* fault that Miguel was using crutches, and now he was making fun of him?

God, what was wrong with him?

That night, he went to bed with a pit in his stomach. He tossed and turned for a long time; the guilt eating away at him. He had to do something. He considered texting Miguel to tell him sorry, but decided against it. It was better to do it in person. The next morning, he was going to go over there and apologize. He *had* to.

Nobody deserved to be treated like that.

The next day, Miguel came out with a pale face, trembling hands, but his shoe laces tied. He smirked at Robby like he'd won the bet of the century.

Chapter 8

After that, Robby went all out. He did everything he could to get a reaction out of Miguel. He thought he was being ridiculously obvious, but Miguel took the bait. Every. Single. Time.

Like when they were both sitting in the living room, and Miguel needed the remote. Robby knew that it was *right there*, but he put on his best puppy dog eyes and pretended to search for it. He could see the expression on Miguel's face, clear as day: *Nobody can be that dumb*. And a few times, Robby actually thought he was going to say it. But then Miguel got up, slow and steady, to fetch it himself.

Robby got more confident with time. Placing Miguel's snacks on the highest shelf. Misplacing his shoes. Hiding his wallet. Anything to get Miguel moving more. It went against every fiber of his being, but he did it anyway.

He talked about karate, all the amazing moves he was doing with Mr. LaRusso. It was all a lie, of course. He hadn't practiced karate since the school fight, but Miguel didn't need to know that.

The one time he mentioned it in front of Johnny, his dad just cocked an eyebrow and let it slide. He wanted Miguel to get better, right? Well, that's what it took to get him back on his feet.

And Robby knew deep inside that he was the only who could do it.

It was hard, though. The guilt still consumed him.

He lay awake at night sometimes, replaying the school fight in his head, wondering what he could have done different.

What if he'd punched Miguel instead of kicked him? What if he'd taken the fight into the hallway and not the balcony? What if he'd put an end to it sooner?

There was no use in asking himself these questions. What was done was done. He couldn't change the past.

But the questions still plagued him.

What if?

Another fight broke out between Cobra Kai and Miyagi-Do. Sam told him all about it, while they were eating ice cream at the park. Hawk had instigated it by messing with Chris at his workplace. They were getting more violent, more aggressive. Sam's voice shook as she recounted what happened.

“—by the time they broke Demetri's arm, security showed up and they were chased off the grounds.”

Robby's jaw tightened. “If only they could have come sooner. Were you hurt?”

“Not a scratch on me,” Sam said with a sad smile. Robby’s eyes were drawn to her arm, where Tory’s mark peaked from underneath her shirt sleeve. It had faded with time, turning a dull red.

Robby’s gaze dropped to his ice cream. It seemed they all had their scars from the school fight; some more obvious than others. He was happy that Tory had stopped coming over, but Miguel was still hanging out with Hawk and his gang of goons.

“We could use some help,” Sam’s voice interrupted his thoughts. She raised an eyebrow when Robby looked up. “The dojo isn’t the same without you.”

A familiar feeling of dread pooled in Robby’s stomach. “How’s it going?” Robby asked to cover it up.

“They’re getting along,” Sam said, before quirking her lips. “Most of the time. It’s actually a miracle they haven’t killed each other yet.”

This time, Robby’s smile was genuine. “Tell me about it.”

So, she talked about the shenanigans that went on during class: the fights, the pranks, the constant bickering that led to daily dick-measuring contests. Robby never would have thought his dad would one day be challenging Mr. LaRusso on the balance wheel. It was surreal.

“How’s Miguel doing?” Sam asked, changing the subject.

“Good. He’s getting better.” Robby stirred the melted ice cream in his cup. “He can finally take a few steps without his crutches. He still has trouble getting up, sitting down and picking up stuff, but I think he should be getting there in the next few weeks.”

“Wow,” Sam said, impressed. “You’re following up really well.”

Robby shrugged. “I do see him every day.”

Not that Miguel likes it, he thought. Sam hummed, and they fell into a comfortable silence. Robby let his mind drift to Miguel. Not anything specific, just the general way he was acting lately. His behavior had improved—slightly. At least he no longer tried to trip Robby with his crutches.

After a moment, Sam shifted in her seat and hesitated.

“Does he... you know. Ask about me?”

He stopped short. There was something about the question and the way she dipped her head, as though to hide a blush.

She’s still interested, Robby realized.

He thought about the dirty looks Miguel gave him whenever he mentioned seeing Sam: the tick in his jaw, the clench of his fists.

Are you guys dating again? Miguel had asked him once. Of course Robby wasn’t dating her. How could he after everything that had happened between them? “We’re just friends,” he’d said, and Miguel had looked away, skeptical. He obviously still cared for her, or else he wouldn’t have asked.

“He definitely thinks about you,” Robby said, and it was probably the truth. Once Miguel had healed, he was going to realize what a big mistake he’d done pushing her away at the hospital, and

he was going to ask her out.

Sam smiled and stared at her ice cream in thought. For some reason, the sight caused Robby's stomach to twist.

It was best not to think about it.

Chapter 9

Miguel still wasn't studying. Robby once heard him tell Johnny that he was waiting to start walking again before he could concentrate on school. Now, weeks later, Robby had yet to see him with a book between his hands. It baffled him that Miguel could throw away his life so easily. Didn't he realize what he was doing to himself?

Robby knew what it was like to cruise through high school with shitty grades. The kids avoided you and the teacher searched for any reason to stick you in detention. Miguel wouldn't stand it. He was a straight edge student, the kind who cared about stupid things like being on the debate club and graduating an honor student. Johnny could mold him into a fighter, but he couldn't take away his core.

Just like everything else, Robby decided to do something about it. It's not because he *cared* exactly. He just didn't want Carmen to spend the next fifty years supporting the guy.

So he waited until he had a moment alone with Carmen. They were working side by side in the kitchen, making paella, when he mentioned he was having trouble with his economics class.

A small smile graced her lips.

"Miguel was always good in that subject," she said in a wistful voice.

Of course he was.

"Really?" Robby asked instead.

"Yes," Carmen said. "He once petitioned for the school board to create a recycling program at the cafeteria so they could reinject money into the system. He'd just learned about monetary policies in class." She continued to chop onions for a few moments in silence. "You know what, maybe he can tutor you."

"Tutor me?" Robby asked, all puppy-dog eyes. "You really think he'd do that?"

"Yes, of course," Carmen said firmly. "Let me talk to him."

Robby smiled, like it hadn't been his plan all along.

Miguel was all game. He was probably happy to finally look down on Robby and kick him down a notch. They ended up scheduling a study session on Thursday afternoon.

They sat at the dining room table and started by going over major themes, before zeroing in on specifics. Miguel was a good teacher. He was serious, thorough, and had a way of explaining concepts in the simplest terms.

He was also sick of Robby's bullshit.

Robby looked down at the textbook with a frown. "Right... so what does price elasticity mean again?"

There was that look again on Miguel's face: *Are you that dumb?* They'd literally read the definition ten minutes before.

“Price elasticity is a measure of how much demand or supply are affected when the price of a product or service goes up or down,” Miguel recited from memory.

When Robby still didn’t say anything, Miguel continued, “It tells you how sensitive the quantity demanded is to its price.”

“Okay,” Robby trailed off.

“Are you seriously not getting this?” Miguel asked, bewildered.

Robby shrugged. “It’s a complicated concept.”

Miguel rolled his eyes. “Look,” he grabbed a pen from the table. “If the price of this pen goes up, people will just go buy another pen from another brand. The price is inelastic. Now take gasoline on the other hand. If the price goes up, people are still going to keep buying it.”

Robby pretended to think about it. “You’re saying the pen is easily replaceable, and the gasoline isn’t.”

Miguel nodded.

He hummed, and then schooled his expression into one of mild curiosity. “So... what would that look like on a graph?”

Miguel eyed him suspiciously. “Are you doing this on purpose?”

“Doing what?”

“Acting dumb,” Miguel said. “Wasting my time. Acting dumb,” he said again.

Robby forced a chuckle. “Listen, man. If you don’t know how to do the graph...”

Miguel narrowed his eyes, before snatching a piece of paper.

Like a fiddle.

“Here,” Miguel said. He drew a horizontal line, a vertical line. He started to write Supply one side and then on the other, hesitated. Robby watched his forehead crease in a thoughtful frown.

“If this is supply,” Miguel muttered. “Then this is...”

He filled out the graph. Then, he hurried and turned to the last pages of the book where the answers were written. His face lit up.

“Aha, I got it right,” Miguel said, smiling all smug and happy.

Robby stared. He’d never seen that expression aimed directly at him. It caused a fluttering sensation inside his chest. After a few seconds, Miguel seemed to remember who he was dealing with. His smile dimmed, and his gaze dropped.

He cleared his throat and moved onto the next definition. Robby stayed silent during the rest of the lesson. When they were done, Miguel asked him mockingly if he also needed help in English Lit.

They set a date for the next lesson.

The warmth in his chest lingered all the way into the afternoon.

He invited Sam over to get his mind off it. They hung out in the living room and watched an episode of Brooklyn Nine-Nine. It was nice, comfortable, and for a moment, Robby could almost forget what had happened.

But then, Miguel's smile would pop into his mind, making his face heat up all over again.

When he walked Sam to the gate, Miguel was getting out of the car with his mom. Sam gave him a wave and a small smile—a clear flirting sign. He looked at her, then at Robby.

His face darkened.

If looks could kill. A bad feeling blossomed in Robby's chest. He held back a shudder, wondering what the hell was going to happen this time.

Chapter 10

It was bound to happen. Robby was just surprised it took this long. Miguel's mood had been worsening over the past week, becoming harder and harder to deal with. He'd gone back to slamming doors, snapping at everyone, glaring.

Robby watched it happen with growing dread. He could see the anger boiling beneath the surface, on the verge of exploding.

He didn't when or where it was going to happen... All he knew was that the steam in a hot kettle had nowhere to go but out.

He returned home to find Miguel alone in the kitchen. Robby dropped the bag of groceries on the counter and started unloading the food, lining them next to the stove.

“Where’s your mom?” Robby asked.

“Went to drop off Yaya at a friend’s house,” came Miguel’s answer.

Robby nodded. He’d promised Carmen he’d cook tonight, his way of thanking her for all the times she’d invited him to dinner. Now, he washed his hands and got to work. He unwrapped the fu and soaked it in a bowl of water. Then, he took out the cutting board and started chopping the carrots.

“What are you doing?” Miguel asked. His voice was weird.

“Making a special Okinawan recipe that Mr. LaRusso taught me. It’s made of gluten wheat and vegetables.”

There was silence behind him. He didn’t think much about it. He continued to work, transferring the chopped carrots into a plate, before moving onto the cabbage.

He heard Miguel stand up and crutch closer. A mug hitting the counter, hot water poured from the kettle, the sound of a spoon in the coffee jar.

Robby thought about Sam. She’d hinted again the day before that she was interested in rekindling her relationship with Miguel. The idea that she wanted to go out with Miguel made a stone settle in the pit of his stomach. It bothered him in a weird way, though he couldn’t decipher why. But Sam was also his friend...

“Are you thinking about dating again?”

The question left his mouth before he could control himself. Miguel stopped moving and turned his head to Robby.

“What?”

Robby glanced at Miguel. There was a blank look at his face.

“Sam was asking about you,” Robby said, raising his eyebrows.

He expected a hopeful look on Miguel’s face. Instead, a broken look flitted across his features. He looked down and started stirring his coffee.

“So, it’s not enough for you that I’m single, now you both have to rub it in my face?”

Wait. *What?*

“No, she’s been asking about you,” Robby said, putting down the knife.

Miguel scoffed. He was stirring his coffee faster and faster. His eyebrows were knitted in a frown, his lower jaw jutting out.

“What’s wrong?” Robby asked.

“I knew you guys were talking about me.” He let out a humorless chuckle. “Laughing behind my back.”

Robby reached for him. “Miguel—”

“Don’t touch me,” Miguel growled.

He pulled back his hand.

“Don’t—” Miguel said, before baring his teeth. “I’m sick and tired of your bullshit.” He threw down his spoon and turned to Robby. “What are you even doing here, huh? Cooking in my kitchen? Eating with my family?”

“I wanted to thank your mom...”

“I don’t give a shit what you wanted.” Miguel cut him off angrily. He shoved Robby in the chest with one hand. “Just because you don’t have a family, you thought you could steal mine? Huh?” Another shove, as he advanced on Robby. “My mom doesn’t even like you. *Sensei* doesn’t like you. He just feels guilty because he blames himself for how you turned out.”

Robby blinked, not understanding how Miguel could go from 0 to 60 in one second. “That’s not true,” he said, slightly panicking.

“Yes, it is, and here you thought you could worm your way in? Get close to *my* family? I see what you are, Robby Keene.” He grabbed Robby by the front of his shirt and yanked him closer, “You’re a slimy—” he was spitting his words “—manipulative—” growling “—asshole whose sole purpose is to make me fucking miserable.”

Miguel swung his head back and pain exploded in Robby’s nose. He stumbled back and fell to the floor, his head slamming against the tiles. Before he could recover, there was a pressure on top of him and a heavy breath on his face.

“Come on, fight back,” Miguel growled.

Another fist flew to his face, white stars bursting behind his eyelids. The pain kept on coming, as Miguel punched him three, four, five times. He was grunting, with every swing of his arm. It took everything in Robby’s willpower not to fight back, not to hurt him.

The anger is normal, he told himself. He needs to let it all out.

Then, hands grabbed him again by the shirt, yanking him closer.

“Fight me, you chickenshit,” Miguel screamed in his face.

Robby was breathing hard, and there was blood in his mouth. He swallowed thickly, copper heavy

on the back of his tongue. He raised a weak arm and grabbed Miguel by the elbow, not stopping him, just holding on.

It's okay.

Miguel stared at him, eyes wild, chest heaving. A long moment passed, drawn out in time. Then, it was like all the fight left him. His shoulders slumped, and before he could fall on top of Robby, he turned himself to the side and landed on the floor. They lay side by side, panting at the ceiling.

Robby's eye was swollen, and his nose felt busted. But for once he felt he deserved it.

When Carmen came home, they were both sitting on the sofa. Robby with an ice pack on his nose, Miguel with his feet resting on the coffee table. They were watching an episode of Survivor.

Chapter 11

Carmen was still yelling at Miguel. Robby could hear her voice all the way into the courtyard.

He'd told the parents that it was his fault. *I'm the one who started it*, but it didn't matter. They were both disappointed in Miguel. Especially Johnny, his lips pressed together, as he'd helped Robby clean his wound in the bathroom.

"It really wasn't his fault," Robby said.

"Robby, I know I haven't always stood up for you," Johnny said, and he sounded so tired, defeated. "But this is where I draw the line."

Robby had stayed quiet after that, only hissing when Johnny had applied the antiseptic onto his skin. The truth was, he wasn't even pissed. It *was* his fault. If he hadn't kicked Miguel off the balcony, they never would have ended up in this situation in the first place.

Now, Robby licked his split lip in the cold air. The dull pain made him feel good, reminded him that he'd done something right. Miguel was walking now, wasn't he?

The sound of the door pulled him out of his thoughts. Miguel emerged from the apartment with a single crutch. His eyebrows were drawn tight, his jaw clenched in anger. He seemed to be taking a moment for himself, breathing in and out. Then, he looked up, and their eyes connected across the courtyard. Robby waved awkwardly.

Miguel let out a sigh and came over. He sat down carefully next to him on the ledge.

"I'm grounded for a week," Miguel said, placing his crutch by his side. He braced his hands against his knees and hunched his shoulders. "Only allowed to go to PT sessions and doctors' appointments."

"That sucks," Robby told him.

Miguel nodded, before looking at Robby. "Why didn't you tell them?"

That I'm the one who started it.

Robby stared at the ground and shrugged. "I figure I had it coming."

"Yeah," Miguel said quietly. "You did."

It was the closest they'd come to discussing what had happened at the school fight.

"I'm sorry," Robby blurted out. When Miguel raised an eyebrow, he took a deep breath and powered through. "I'm sorry for kicking you at school. I was angry that Sam preferred you over me, and I was jealous that you were spending so much time with my dad. I never should have taken it out on you."

There was a long moment of silence, before Miguel spoke.

"You already apologized at the hospital." Then, after a beat, "And in the parking lot."

"I did," Robby conceded. "But I'm hoping my apology will make a difference this time."

Miguel snorted and looked away. “You know... I really hated you after what happened, what you did to me.” He swallowed, his throat bobbing in the shadows. “Every day, I regretted not breaking your arm when I had the chance.”

Robby kept quiet. He remembered the feeling like it was yesterday. Strong hands pulling his shoulder back, his whole body tense as he waited for the inevitable *crack*.

“I held onto that anger for so long, thinking you deserved it,” Miguel said, before licking his lips. “But even I can see that things have changed since then...” He kicked his foot on the ground, stalling for time. “... Okay.”

“What?” Robby asked.

Miguel looked at him.

“Okay to your apology,” he said. At Robby’s incredulous look, he continued, “As much as I hate to admit it, you helped a lot these past few months. Not just that, but you also made my mom’s life easier.” His eyes dropped. “She was really stressed before you came along.”

Robby breathed in and out. He hadn’t expected that. He hadn’t—he looked away. The emotion was rising in his throat, thick and heavy, threatening to take over.

“Thank you,” Robby croaked.

“Yeah, but we’re not even,” Miguel said, peering up at Robby. “We’ll never be, you hear me?”

Robby nodded quickly. He knew that already. But also...

“Does that mean you’ll stop acting like an asshole?” Robby asked, and he almost slapped himself.

But Miguel didn’t take it badly. He just rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, whatever,” Miguel said. He stood up and grabbed his crutch. “If you promise to stop smoking weed with my Yaya.”

That surprised a laugh out of Robby. He nodded again, before saying. “Got that.”

He wasn’t fully forgiven but it was a start.

No amount of foundation could cover the bruises on his face. Shannon’s mouth fell at the sight of him. “Jesus, Robby. What happened to your face?”

“Nothing, mom,” Robby said, but she was already hurrying out of her chair.

“This isn’t nothing,” she said, grabbing him by the chin. He hissed, and she held him more gently. “Robby.”

Her eyes were fixed on his face, unwavering. Robby sighed and took a seat at the table. She followed and reached for his hand.

“I got into a fight with Miguel,” he said. Before she could say anything, he added, “It was my fault.”

Her eyes became sad. “Tell me what happened.”

So, Robby started from the beginning. She already knew that he'd moved in with Johnny, but he'd never told her details. Now he opened up about everything. Talked about how he'd been helping the Diaz family get back on their feet. How close he'd grown to Carmen and Rosa. As he spoke, he realized how much they'd become part of his daily life.

When he finished talking, Shannon went quiet.

"This is your way of apologizing for what happened," she said.

Robby stared down at the table. "It was the least I could do."

"Sweetie, it's very honorable of you, and believe me, I am so proud of you, but this—" she brushed her hand against his cheek. "This isn't normal."

"Mom, it's getting better," Robby said, clenching his hand into a fist. "We're getting better."

It had only been a few days since the fight, but he could already tell that something had changed between them. Gone were the snarky comments, the dirty looks. The day before, Robby had made a joke and Miguel had cracked a smile—an actual smile. It had lit up his face like the sun.

"What are you thinking about?" Shannon asked. He looked at her in question. "You have a dreamy look in your face."

Robby felt his face heat up. What the hell was wrong with him? He leaned back into the chair and asked his mom about rehab.

That night, he dreamed of the fight in the kitchen. Miguel shoved him in the chest, again and again, until Robby stumbled back and landed on the floor. The punches came, raining on him like a hurricane, until suddenly Miguel yanked him up by the shirt. *Fight me you chickenshit*, he was supposed to say but instead, he smashed their lips together.

It was a swirl of tongue and teeth. Hot lips went down Robby's neck, hands pulling at his shirt, and it felt so good. There was a hard pressure pressing down on him, moving against him, and the pleasure was crescendoing inside of him, higher and higher.

Robby woke up in a cold sweat.

Chapter 12

Robby knew what was going on. He was having intrusive thoughts. Isn't that what the counselor had told him in sixth grade?

Leave the thoughts alone. Treat them as if they're boring, and they'll eventually fade into the background.

He couldn't control them. All he needed to do was accept them and they'd go away on their own. But it was easier said than done. Now that the fight had broken the ice between them, they were spending more time with each other and suddenly Robby got to see a different side of Miguel.

He'd seen glimpses of it before, tucked behind the anger and the pain, but now he got to experience it firsthand. No wonder Miguel was so well-liked. He was funny, smart, easy-going. He still snapped from time to time, moments where he lost it on everyone and locked himself in his bedroom; but mostly he'd cooled down.

With time, they settled in a routine of studying, eating and exercising together. It was easy, comfortable. It made Robby's thoughts that much harder to deal with.

A week later, Miguel asked him for a ride to the mall. Robby didn't think much about it. He figured Miguel wanted a change of scenery, so he dropped his book and agreed.

It was a surprise when he found Hawk waiting in the food court.

Robby felt his hackles rise. Hawk's hair was its signature red color, clashing with his yellow sweater. At the sight of Miguel, his lips stretched into a wide smile. He sprang to his feet and hugged him, tapping him on the back. Robby stayed behind, watching him suspiciously.

"Emo boy still stuck to you?" Hawk asked, nodding his head in Robby's direction.

Robby clenched his fists.

"Whatever, man," Miguel said, shrugging. "He just gave me a ride."

They sat down at a table and started catching up. Robby stayed back. He didn't like that Miguel was still seeing Hawk. There was something about the guy that set him on edge. From all the stories that Sam told him, he had some serious anger issues.

Robby sat down at an empty table nearby and opened his book, careful to keep an eye on them. They talked about general things at first, like school and friends. Robby let their voices wash over him, until Hawk started talking about Cobra Kai.

"—already preparing us for the All-Valley. We have class four times a week, and he goes really hard on us. He teaches us badass moves, not like that pussy Sensei Lawrence."

Robby tensed, his eyes flying to Miguel.

"Come on, man," Miguel said, awkward. "You know I don't like when you talk shit about Sensei."

"But Kreese teaches us no mercy," Hawk said firmly. "The way Sensei Lawrence used to, before he backed off like a coward. If he hadn't done that, you wouldn't have—" He dropped his voice.

“This wouldn’t have happened to you.”

Miguel stared at the floor and shook his head slowly. “There’s no point in thinking about that. What happened is in the past.”

“Is that why you’re hanging around with emo boy?” Hawk asked.

Robby could feel Miguel’s eyes on him.

“Hawk...”

“What if somebody comes across you now, huh? How are you going to defend yourself?”

“Come on, nobody’s coming after me.”

“Really?” Hawk asked. Then, in a thin voice, “What about Cobra Kai?”

“Why would they?” Miguel asked, confused.

Hawk’s jaw tightened. “With everything that’s happened... hanging out with Keene, breaking up with Tory, not swearing allegiance to Sensei Kreese. The students might think you’ve sided with the enemy.”

The meaning was clear. *Have you?*

Robby’s skin crawled. There was a tense moment, during which Miguel stayed still. He was too smart to show his fear, but Robby could see the question on his face, the quick dart of his eyes across Hawk’s body, wondering *Can I take him?*

“At least he doesn’t hide behind shitty hair and a shittier personality,” Robby said loudly.

Hawk’s eyes snapped up to him, and his lip curled in a sneer. “What did you say?”

“You heard me,” Robby said, putting down his book. He got up and cracked his neck. “Phineas and Ferb called. They said they want their hairdos back.”

“Watch your mouth,” Hawk said, surging to his feet. He sauntered closer, his features set in a scowl.

“Or what? You’re going to fight me?” Robby asked, opening up his arms. “Remember, I kicked your ass at the All-Valley.”

“That was dumb luck. I’m stronger than you now.”

Robby inched closer until they were face to face. “Want to test that?”

Hawk clenched his fists, as they breathed in each other’s faces. He looked two seconds away from clocking Robby. Throughout the entire exchange, Miguel had remained silent, watching them.

Finally, Hawk’s eyes dropped to the side and he took a step back.

“You’re not worth my time,” Hawk said, sitting back down next to Miguel.

Robby wasn’t dumb enough to think that Hawk was afraid of him, but he was afraid of losing Miguel’s friendship. Robby backed off slowly and returned to his table. He opened his book, his body still on high alert.

Hawk spent the rest of the hour talking about school.

When they returned to the car, Robby expected Miguel to blow up in his face. So, the moment he shut the door, he threw himself into an explanation.

“I’m sorry, okay? The guy’s an idiot if he thinks Kreese is gonna win against my dad and Mr. LaRusso. I know he’s your friend, but seriously? Kreese is better than my dad? What a joke. If you ask me, that guy’s an asshole who has no idea what’s coming for him at the Tournament and—”

“You’re right.”

Robby’s mouth snapped shut. The surprise must have shown on his face, because Miguel continued talking.

“Hawk changed.” Miguel shrugged. “I should probably stop seeing him, but he’s one of the only friends who still visited me after... after the accident.”

That’s not true, Robby was going to say, but he held back his tongue. Since when did he consider himself a friend?

“Anyway, he’s not wrong. Once I’m strong enough, I’ll probably join Miyagi-Do. No way am I ever going back to Cobra Kai.”

“Really?” Robby asked.

Miguel nodded, and then silence hung between them.

“Yeah,” Robby said quietly. He put his key in the ignition and turned on the car, the sound of the engine revving to life. “I’d do the same.”

If I ever did karate again, Robby thought.

Chapter 13

“So you guys are getting along?” Johnny asked, twirling the spaghetti with his fork.

They were having dinner together with the TV blaring in the background; some reality show about classic car restoration. Robby paused his fork midair.

“What?” He asked.

Johnny shoveled food into his mouth. His eyes were set on his plate, carefully avoiding Robby’s gaze. “You and Miguel. It seems like you guys are buddies now.”

Robby’s heart rate picked up. What kind of question was that?

He lowered his fork and thought back to the night before. Sitting outside, talking about college, passing a joint back and forth. It felt natural, like they’d been friends all their lives, and Miguel was laughing now. Small genuine laughs that made Robby’s insides twist.

“Why?” Robby asked, suddenly suspicious. It was unlike his dad to ask these kinds of questions. “Is this about you and Mrs. Diaz?”

“What do you mean?” Johnny asked, innocent as ever.

Robby’s stomach dropped. “Is something going on between you two?”

“I’m not sure,” Johnny said, shrugging. His face had gone red. “But you know, I’d like to try. Let’s just say it would be easier if you two got along.”

Robby looked down at his plate. Yeah, he did get along with Miguel, but what Johnny was suggesting—that was a whole other level. If they ever got serious, if they ever got married, that would make him and Miguel family. Not just family, *step-brothers*. The idea caused a knot to form in his belly.

“Yeah,” Robby said, putting down his fork. “We do get along.”

He’d lost his appetite.

His dad’s words rang in his head during the rest of the week. Robby wanted to tell Miguel, but it felt like a weird thing to share. So what if Johnny wanted to go out with Miguel’s mom? They dated before, and it wasn’t too surprising that they wanted to try again.

Miguel had gotten sick of exercising in the courtyard and suggested they work out at the park instead. So on Monday morning, they climbed into the car and drove to closest public park they could find. They searched for an empty spot on the grass, set down their things and started their routine.

They were ten minutes into the workout when Miguel spoke up.

“Everything okay?” Miguel asked. He was sitting down with his legs wide open, reaching for his toes. He’d already broken a sweat, his dark hair curling around his neck.

Our parents want to bang, Robby thought.

“Yeah,” he said instead. “Why?”

Miguel frowned. “You looked distracted.”

Robby shifted from where he sat a few feet away. He imagined Johnny and Carmen getting married. His father in a white jacket, Miguel’s mom with a bouquet. They’d be one big, happy family. Isn’t that what he’d always wanted?

He dropped his eyes to the grass and pulled a few strands.

“How would you feel if our parents got back together?”

Miguel slowed down his stretch and wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist.

“Why?”

“Just my dad,” Robby said, shrugging. “He mentioned something about it last night.”

Miguel stared at him. “Like he actually wants to date my mom again?”

“Yeah.”

There was a long silence between them. Then, Miguel’s eyes dropped and he continued to stretch his leg, his face pinched tight.

“He can do whatever he wants,” Miguel said.

Robby’s heart sank.

“Really?” Robby asked slowly. “So you wouldn’t mind if they got serious with each other?”

Miguel shook his head. “He can do whatever he wants, doesn’t mean it’ll work out.”

“But the way my dad talked about it, it seemed like your mom was also interested—”

“It won’t work out,” Miguel said more firmly. His eyes connected with Robby.

Robby bit back his tongue. He knew it was nothing against Johnny, because he knew for a fact that Miguel loved him. So, why was he reacting this way?

Maybe he doesn’t want to be stuck to you forever, you idiot. Ever think of that?

Had he reached the same conclusion as Robby? That if the relationship got serious, they could potentially become step-brothers? Miguel had switched legs, but there were tight lines around his mouth. Robby’s chest ached, in a way it hadn’t since he was a small kid.

After the workout, he lied to Miguel and told him he had a lesson with Mr. LaRusso. Robby dropped him off at home and went to the library instead.

He needed time for himself.

Robby did what he always did: he retreated. He wished he could be one of those people who brushed off the hurt, continued as if nothing had happened but he wasn’t.

The rejection stung.

He tried to keep himself busy by reading and studying. It was the only way to keep his mind off the maelstrom of emotions inside of him. The only way to ignore the hurt caused by Miguel's words. Robby still helped Miguel as much as he could, but he was more quiet now, more reserved.

Miguel noticed. Of course, he did. He frowned when Robby answered in curt sentences and tried to get him to open up. Every time, Robby's insides twisted in shame.

He didn't see the point in talking about it. Miguel was already using his crutches less; there were days when he didn't even touch them. Soon, he was going to be doing everything on his own.

By then, he wouldn't need Robby anymore.

Chapter 14

They were having dinner, and it was quieter than usual. Carmen was talking about her work day and the nurse strike they had planned for the end of the month. Rosa asked her questions every now and then, but she was the only one. Even Johnny stayed silent, seemingly lost in thought.

Robby played with his food. He couldn't focus with Miguel sitting next to him, their elbows brushing every time one of them so much as moved.

When they were done eating, Carmen stood up and started gathering all the plates.

"How about we go out for ice cream?" She asked, glancing at Johnny. "There's a new place that opened on Chase Street. I've been dying to try it."

"That's a good idea," Johnny said, taking the plates from her. "Boys?"

Before Robby could say anything, Miguel spoke up. "We're already going to the movies." He gave an apologetic shrug. "Sorry."

Robby looked at him cautiously, but Miguel had already gone to do the dishes. He sighed and resigned himself to another night playing chaperon. He helped Rosa put away the food in the fridge.

When he was done, Miguel was already waiting for him at the door. Robby slipped on his jacket and grabbed his keys.

"So, where do you need a ride to?" Robby asked, stepping outside. It was cold, so he zipped up his jacket.

"What?" Miguel asked, as they walked toward the car.

"You want to go see Hawk, right?" Robby asked with raised eyebrows. Miguel frowned, so he added, "That's why you told your mom you're going to the movies with me..."

Miguel stared at him for a beat, before scoffing. "No, we're really going to the movies." A small smile played on his lips. "There's a showing of Enter The Dragon at the old theater tonight. I thought you'd enjoy it."

Robby slowed down, but Miguel continued to walk, worry-free. He hurried to catch up with him.

"Um, okay," Robby said, as he unlocked the car. Miguel climbed inside before Robby could ask more.

The cinema was a small theater located on Sherman Way. There were vintage posters on the front and a single ticket booth guarding the entrance. Miguel insisted on buying the tickets (*I asked you to come, it's on me*). So, Robby paid him back by getting the popcorn.

The theater was only half full, so they picked seats in the back.

"It's been ages since I went to the cinema," Miguel said, stretching into his seat. "Last movie I watched was before the tournament with Aisha. What about you?"

“I don’t remember,” Robby said, putting popcorn in his mouth. “I’m more of a late-night TV kinda guy.”

Miguel hummed. “Well, apparently this movie is awesome. Sensei told me all about it, said it was one of his favorites as a teenager.”

Robby went silent. Miguel ate some more popcorn, before he realized what he’d said and straightened up. “I mean, it just came up in a conversation, you know. It’s not like he was confiding in me or anything...”

“You don’t need to do that,” Robby said stiffly. “Act like you’re not close to my dad.”

“I’m not,” Miguel defended himself. “I’m not acting. I mean yeah, we’re close and we talk, but it’s nothing compared to you.”

Robby scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

“No, really,” Miguel insisted. “I know you guys don’t always get along, but I haven’t once seen him drunk since you moved in. He never would have done that for me.”

That was... true. Johnny drank a beer every now and then, but not enough to get tipsy. But still.

“Didn’t you spend the last few months making me think you guys were BFFs?

“Oh, come on... Like you didn’t mess with me too. What about all those fake karate lessons with Mr. LaRusso?” When he saw the shock on Robby’s face, he raised an eyebrow. “Did you really think I wouldn’t find out?”

Robby’s heart caught in his throat. “Miguel, I didn’t mean to—”

Miguel waved him off. “Come on, it’s okay. I see what you were trying to do. You were just trying to help me get better.”

Robby closed his mouth, *Miguel has a big heart*, Carmen had once said. He was starting to realize how true it was. The lights in the room dimmed.

“Oh, I love trailers,” Miguel said excitedly. Robby blinked, as intro music started playing. He was going to get whiplash from the conversation. He tried to relax into his seat and enjoy the screen.

When they left the theater, the sky had turned to dusk. They talked about the movie on the entire drive home. It was really good. The sound effects were ridiculous and the plot points over-the-top, but the kung fu itself was spectacular.

Afterward, Robby walked Miguel to his door. It was silent outside. They stalled for a few moments, not knowing what to say.

“Thanks for the invite,” Robby said awkwardly. “I really liked the movie.”

“There’s another kung fu movie showing next month,” Miguel told him. “We could go see that too.”

“Yeah,” Robby surprised himself by saying. “I’d love that.”

Miguel nodded, turned to the door and stopped. Robby waited. He watched as Miguel warred with

himself, obviously grappling with a decision.

“About the other day,” Miguel said, shifting back on his feet. His eyes dropped to the floor before darting back up. “I hope you didn’t take it the wrong way... It would be great if our parents got together.”

Robby went still. He hadn’t expected this at all.

“What?” Robby croaked.

“I mean, they dated before,” Miguel continued, carefully shrugging. “And I know that Sensei treats my mom really well, so they’d be happy together. And that’s all that matters, right?”

But there was something off about Miguel’s demeanor. Robby didn’t know what it was. His eyes scanned over Miguel’s body once, twice. There was a subtle tightness in his shoulders, an unnatural stillness in his face. It was almost like—

He was lying.

“Yeah,” Robby said. His mind was still reeling with the revelation. “I think so too.”

Miguel leveled him with an intense stare. Something passed between them, Robby didn’t know what, he didn’t understand anything anymore. Then, Miguel’s lips stretched into a small smile and he turned to go inside.

Robby stayed fixed to the spot, his head spinning and his heart racing in his chest. What the hell was going on?

He knew why *he* was lying, but why was Miguel?

The next day, Miguel asked Sam out on a date, and she said yes.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Night had fallen, and Robby was sitting outside in the courtyard. He told himself that he was getting some air, possibly winding down for the night, but the way his eyes kept sliding to the gate told a different story.

Was it pathetic that he was waiting for Miguel? He'd left for his date with Sam right before dinner. It was now ten o'clock, and there was still no sign of him. Biting his lip, Robby fished a packet of weed out of his jean pocket and started rolling a joint.

An hour later, he'd finished his second joint when a car rolled onto the curb. He recognized it as Sam's car right away, white and sleek in the darkness. It slowed to a halt, the door opened, and Miguel stepped out.

Robby's heart fluttered. Miguel was dressed in jeans for once and he'd fixed his hair, so that it was brushed back in wavy curls. He was also leaning hard on his crutch, which told Robby that he'd had a long day on his feet.

Miguel told Sam good bye and walked through the gate and into the courtyard. He was close to his apartment door, when he stopped in his tracks.

Robby's heart raced in his chest, as Miguel turned to him.

"I thought I smelled some weed," Miguel said, his lip curling on one side. He came and sat next to him.

Robby played with the lighter in his pocket. "How was your date?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Why? You jealous?"

"No," Robby said too quickly.

Miguel scoffed in amusement. He scratched a spot on his jeans and shrugged. "Good."

He didn't look like he was going to say more.

"Good?" Robby repeated.

Miguel licked his lips. "It was good. Just... I don't know. It was different." He paused. "She's different."

"How?"

Miguel shrugged again. "I don't know."

But he obviously *did*. Robby needed to find out. He bit his lip and jostled Miguel with his shoulder.

"Come on, tell me," Robby said.

Please. He held his breath, waiting for an answer. It was silent except for the sounds of a fountain trickling in the distance. Miguel ran a hand through his hair, before dropping it.

“It’s like... she doesn’t understand what I’ve been through, you know? With the coma, the injury, the therapy...” Miguel trailed off. “She keeps thinking we shared something, because Tory hurt her, but... it’s not the same, you know?”

He looked at Robby. Yes, Robby knew exactly what he meant. He’d thought he was the only one who felt it, but he realized now that Miguel was the same way. The tragedy had bound them, intertwining them in a way he’d never thought possible.

“Yeah,” Robby said quietly.

They stared at each other for a few seconds. Robby swallowed, and Miguel’s eyes snapped down to his throat, before slowly moving back up.

“Yeah?” Miguel asked in a low voice. Hopeful, like he wanted to know he wasn’t alone.

That’s when Robby realized how close they were sitting. Miguel’s shoulder pressed against his, the smell of his cologne drifting in the space between them. Was Robby imagining something?

Then, Miguel looked away, breaking the moment. Robby’s mouth went dry.

“I want to concentrate on what matters,” Miguel said, kicking his foot on the ground. “Right now, that means getting better.”

Later that night, Robby thought about Johnny and Daniel, how they’d fought against each other at the All-Valley in ‘84. Johnny had really hurt Daniel, and their relationship was still fucked up thirty four years later because of it.

That’s how Robby felt about Miguel.

Over the next few days, Robby kept replaying the scene at the fountain. The softness in Miguel’s voice, the way his heavy gaze had settled on Robby’s throat. The air had been electrifying that night.

It had woken something inside of him. Now, when Miguel bumped his knee, his heart skipped a beat. When Miguel touched his hand, his belly tightened. He felt like a live wire 24/7. He even wondered if Miguel was doing it on purpose, but it wasn’t possible, right? Nobody could be oblivious.

Like right now, they’d decided to watch a movie, and Miguel was sitting close to him, sucking on a twizzler; his lips red and wet, as he licked the candy. Robby didn’t realize he was staring until Miguel elbowed him in the arm.

“So, the other day when we talked in the car.” Miguel said, popping the twizzler out of his mouth. “You *are* thinking about joining, right?”

Robby looked up from Miguel’s mouth.

“Joining what?” Robby asked.

“Miyagi-Do.”

Robby blinked. He hadn’t expected the question. But Miguel knew the truth now, so there was no

point in lying anymore. “No.”

“Why?”

He shrugged.

“Is it because of Mr. LaRusso?” Miguel asked.

Johnny had asked him the same question months ago. This time, Robby answered properly.

“He’s a part of it,” Robby conceded, biting his lip. “The truth is I haven’t talked to him since the school fight. He tries to call me every now and then, but I’m too much of a coward to pick up.”

Miguel’s lips parted, like he hadn’t expected Robby to be so straightforward. After a while, he nodded. “And the other part?”

Robby raised an eyebrow, like it was really obvious. Miguel dropped his eyes and looked away. “Oh, yeah. Okay.”

He sucked on his twizzler, lost in thought, and didn’t say anything for the rest of the movie.

Chapter End Notes

Next update on Wednesday .: *☆

Chapter 16

Robby was studying at the dining table when he got the message from Miguel. *Meet me at 8pm, with a Google location.* Frowning, he got up and went to look out the window. The courtyard was empty and the Diaz door was closed. That's when Robby realized he hadn't seen Miguel all afternoon.

Where are you? he texted back.

A few seconds later, his phone pinged.

Just be there.

After dinner, he slipped on his shoes, told his dad he was going to meet with Miguel and headed out. The location was five minutes away, and the closer he got, the more he grew confused. He rolled onto the side of the curb and parked the car.

It was a playground on the side of the road; abandoned by the looks of it. There were slides and swings, all in bad shape, and the ground was covered with wood chips. Robby walked through the area until he noticed a figure in between the frames.

“Miguel?” Robby called out.

Miguel stood there, dressed in jogging pants and a hoodie. His feet were a shoulder's width apart, his hands behind his back. There was a black band around his head.

“What's going on?” Robby asked, glancing around. “Why did you call me here?”

“I've decided to join Miyagi-Do.”

“Okay,” Robby said uncertainly. “Why are you telling me this here?”

“Because I haven't told Sensei yet. I want to get stronger first, and for that I need your help.”

Robby swallowed. He was getting a bad feeling. “Well, we can add more muscle training at the gym, and work on your flexibility if you want...”

“No, that's not what I mean,” Miguel said firmly. He took a step forward and squared his shoulders. “I want you to train me.”

There was a long pause, during which Robby registered the words.

“What?” Robby said. “No way. I told you I didn't want to do karate.”

“This isn't about training you, it's about me.” He tongued the inside of his cheek. “Or are you the only one who can play this game?”

Before Robby could ask what he meant, Miguel walked up to him, until they were almost foot to foot.

“Come on,” Miguel said, gesturing at himself. “Hit me.”

“I'm not gonna hit you,” Robby said in bewilderment. He'd spent the last three months avoiding karate. He wasn't going through that all away just because—

He blocked the punch just as it came aiming for his head. Then, another and another, Miguel was slow, but also good, zeroing in on Robby's weak points, aiming for the kill.

Robby's body moved on its own; the blood pumping through his veins like it hadn't in a long time. The air felt crisper, his vision clearer. He did his best to defend himself until Miguel pivoted and raised his arm in an elbow jab. Robby dodged it, grabbed his wrist and threw him to the ground.

His heart dropped.

"Shit, are you okay?" Robby said, hurrying to Miguel's side. He was lying flat on his back, panting. *Thank God for the wood chips.* "Here, let me help you."

Miguel grabbed his arm and pulled himself to his feet, wincing. He dusted the dirt off his pants.

"This is exactly why I shouldn't do karate anymore," Robby said angrily. "I can't be trusted."

Miguel laughed. "You're the only one I can trust, asshole. Do it again."

Robby breathed in and out. He was about to ask Miguel if he'd knocked his head, because he wasn't making any sense. Why was he doing this?

Because he wants to go back to normal, can't you see? Robby looked at Miguel and sure enough, there was a determined glint in his eye and an upward tilt in his chin. For a second, Robby's heart ached. He looked like the Miguel from the All-Valley.

This time, when they sparred, Miguel swiped his leg and Robby landed on his back.

"Told you not to go easy on me," Miguel said, smiling.

He was leaning over Robby, his breath hot and fast against his lips. Robby remembered his dream again and flushed.

Miguel's smile dimmed. He got up and put out his hand.

"Again?"

Robby nodded and pulled himself up.

They stayed late at the playground, sparring. But Robby's good mood died when they returned home and found Johnny standing in the Diaz doorway, talking with Carmen.

"Oh, good thing you're both here," Johnny said, his eyes darting between the two of them. "We need to talk."

Robby shared a worried look with Miguel.

They ended up sitting on the sofa, listening to Carmen go on and on about how close they'd all become these past few months, how she and Johnny had done a lot of mistakes in the past but this time they were doing the right thing. Johnny remained quiet by her side, listening. She went on and on—

"What are you trying to say?" Miguel cut in, when Carmen dragged it out endlessly.

Johnny put a hand on Carmen's elbow and took a step forward. "What your mom is trying to say is

that we've decided that we won't be seeing each other anymore."

Robby froze, and so did Miguel. He couldn't believe it. For a moment, he'd thought—

"So you're not going to date each other anymore?" Robby asked in a weird voice.

"We thought it was for the best," Carmen said, and she sounded apologetic. Johnny looked a bit miffed. "You two have been getting along so well, and you've been through so much. We don't want to do anything to ruin that."

He could feel Miguel press closer to him. He looked up, and for a moment, he could see his own thoughts mirrored in Miguel's expression.

Holy shit.

Chapter 17

The next day, Robby found them a proper gym to train in. It was better than the playground: thick mats on the floor, ceiling lights, controlled air-temperature. They started to train three times a week, and every time, the tension simmered between them.

It became harder for him to ignore his feelings. When they sparred, his eyes wandered to the hard lines of Miguel's body, the way sweat pooled in the dip of his throat, the intensity in his eyes. Miguel had grown bigger, stronger. He'd gained muscle, and he was more agile now, easily taking down Robby with a twist of his hips.

Robby shivered whenever it happened, pleasure curling around his spine. It was almost like a game between them. How far they could dance around this thing between them without bringing it out in the open.

For once in his life, Robby let it be. He didn't want to risk ruining things by rushing.

Not this time.

Johnny suggested that they spend the day at Valley Fest. There was going to be fireworks for the 4th Annual Spring Fling. Robby didn't feel like it but in the face of Miguel's puppy-dog excitement, he said yes. So, they all climbed into the Dodge Caravan and headed out.

The place was crowded in the afternoon; a buzz of excitement reigning over the sound of the attractions.

“So, what do you want to do first?” Johnny said, rubbing his hands together.

Miguel's eyes lit up. “We could start at the arcade. Play some air hockey.”

“Yeah?” Johnny said, smiling. “Didn't know you liked getting your ass kicked, Diaz. What do you say, Robin?”

Robby rolled his eyes at the old nickname, but he couldn't help the smile that stretched his lips.

“Sure, Dad.”

He half-expected Johnny to team up with Miguel, but his dad grabbed him by the shoulder and declared them a father-and-son team. Miguel sided with Carmen.

It was so much fun; almost like they'd never been apart. Johnny was still as good as Robby remembered, his movements quick and agile as he hit the puck. They won every time. They went around the park, going from stand to stand, playing dart games, wack-the-mole, skee-ball. Eventually, Robby and Miguel teamed up against the parents and started leading the score. Each time, they laughed so much that their sides hurt.

Afterward, they moved onto the rides. Everything was going great, until they went on the Big Drop and Johnny stumbled off, looking pale and queasy.

“Still scared of heights, old man?” Robby asked, smirking.

“Whatever,” Johnny grumbled. He dug his hand into his pocket and pushed a crumpled bill into

Robby's hand. "Go get some cotton candy or something."

Robby took the money and raised an eyebrow at Miguel.

"I could eat," Miguel said, smiling.

So, they separated and went their own way. Night had fallen, and the stars speckled the sky like tiny jewels. Miguel stayed close by as they walked through the throngs of people. He was limping slightly, which told Robby that he'd walked too much that day.

Robby bought a stick of cotton candy for the each of them.

"Let's sit somewhere?" Robby asked.

Miguel searched around, his shoulder dropping. "I don't think we'll find a spot..."

"I know a place," Robby said, leading Miguel through the crowd. It had been so long ago, so he wasn't sure it was still there. He turned a corner, away from the crowd, and breathed a sigh of relief. The empty bench was behind the dart stand.

Miguel made a surprised sound in his throat and sat down gratefully. They ate for a moment in silence.

"You come here often?" Miguel asked.

"No," Robby said, taking a bite of cotton candy. "Why?"

"Seems like you know your way around."

Robby lowered the cotton candy. "I came here once with my dad."

"When?" Miguel asked.

"When I was a kid," Robby said slowly. "He disappeared for three months during summer and then showed up at our doorstep, begging my mom to take me out for the day. She said yes. So he took me... here."

Miguel bit his lip. "That bad, huh?"

"Actually, no."

He looked surprised.

"I didn't show it at the time, but I loved it," Robby continued, slightly embarrassed. "It's one of my favorite memories of him. We went on all the rides, played darts, wack-a-mole." He quirked his lips. "Air hockey."

"Wait, is that why he called you Robin?"

"Yeah," Robby said, smiling. "He said I gave him good luck."

Miguel chuckled. "I didn't think Sensei could be that cheesy. What other good memories do you have?"

It was hard to wade through all the bad ones. Johnny had messed up a lot when he was a kid. There were a lot of missed birthdays, soccer games and other stuff. Still Robby managed to find a few

good ones. They didn't happen often, but they did matter, like the time Johnny beat up his mom's boyfriend for raising a hand on Robby.

Miguel was content to chew on his cotton candy and listen.

"You boys better hurry up," a voice came from the stand. "The fireworks are gonna start soon."

Robby looked around him. The crowd had thinned, as the people moved toward the open air.

As though on queue, there was a loud crack and a flare shot into the sky, before exploding in all directions. It was spectacular; the reds, blues and greens all mixing together in a medley of colors. The flares shot one after the other, lighting up the sky, again and again.

Robby tipped his head back and closed his eyes against the brightness. This was his favorite memory of all. Sitting on his dad's shoulders, his hands buried in tousled hair, as they watched the fireworks together.

Something brushed against his hand. Robby opened his eyes and looked down. Miguel's hand was close to his, pinkie sticking out and intertwining with Robby's. With his heart in his throat, Robby looked up.

Miguel was staring at him, his eyes two inky pools of darkness.

A shiver ran down Robby's spine. He swallowed thickly and looked back up. Nothing could beat those memories, but this was a close one.

Chapter 18

It was a good sparring session, but Miguel got tired forty minutes in and asked if they could go home. *I'm just not feeling it*, he said in a wavering voice. A sliver of unease shot down Robby's back. He shoved it down and drove them home.

He expected Miguel to call it a night, so he was surprised when he asked instead, "Wanna watch a movie?"

"Uh, yeah," Robby said, shifting on his feet.

Five minutes later, he was jamming his key into the lock of his apartment and shoving the door open with his shoulder.

"It's better if we watch it at my place. My dad's not here," Robby said, as they slipped off their jackets and shoes. "He's out on a date."

"Date?" Miguel asked, draping his jacket on the armchair.

"Yeah," Robby said, heading into the kitchen. "Want a drink?"

"Sure."

He opened the fridge and eyed the contents. "Coke or 7-Up?"

"Coke," Miguel replied. After a beat, "Date with whom?"

Robby reached inside and grabbed two cans. "Some chick he met at a bar. Said she bumped into him while he was paying his tab." He turned around, chuckling. "I think—"

He stopped, the laughter dying in his throat. Miguel was sitting on the sofa, his torso bent over as he massaged his right calf. When he noticed Robby, he straightened up quickly.

"What's wrong?" Robby asked, his heart sinking.

Miguel shook his head. "Don't worry about it."

"No," Robby said firmly. He went to sit down next to Miguel and reached for his calf, but he didn't dare touch. "Shit, I knew I hit you too hard. It was that second fall, wasn't it? You should have told me I was being too rough, I would have gone easier on you." He clenched his fists in frustration. "You know what, I think you still have some painkillers at the house. Let me go get—"

He was about to stand up, when Miguel grabbed him by the elbow and yanked him back down.

"Oh my God," Miguel said, laughing. "Will you stop worrying? You're like a mother hen. I'm fine, it's just a little sore. See," he moved his leg, bending it and stretching it in every direction. He had a full range of motion. "Don't you get sore after a day's training?"

Robby opened his mouth, closed it. "Shit," he breathed out, running a hand through his hair. "Sorry. I just thought—" he dropped his hand. "I get a little paranoid sometimes."

"I can see that," Miguel said, arching an eyebrow.

Robby looked away, his face reddening. He felt stupid suddenly.

“Wanna watch TV?” Robby asked after an awkward silence.

There was no reply. When he glanced back, Miguel was quietly staring at him. In the low light, his eyes looked darker, more intense.

“Yeah,” Miguel said, his voice rough.

Robby bit his lip. He grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. He powered through the channels until he landed on a familiar movie.

“Taxi Driver, you ever watch it?”

“No,” Miguel said, leaning back into the seat. He sounded almost normal again. “Is it good?”

“Yeah,” Robby said. It was one of the few DVDs they’d owned at home. He used to watch it late at night, when his mom went out for drinks at the bar. He didn’t think it was appropriate for a twelve-year old, but it sure kept him from feeling lonely.

He checked the time. It was ten minutes into the movie, so he caught up Miguel on everything that had happened so far. Then, they settled down for the rest.

Robby focused on the movie as best as he could, though it was hard with Miguel sitting next to him. He felt hyper-aware of Miguel’s body, from the wide spread of his legs to the way he breathed, deep and slow. He tried to cover his nerves by talking.

“I read somewhere that Robert De Niro prepared for his role by driving a cab in New York City.”

Miguel sat next to him, listening.

Robby continued. “He’d just won his Oscar for his part in Godfather, and he was really into a method acting. It’s actually a funny story. So, he was driving one night, and supposedly a struggling actor recognized him on one of his trips.” He smiled and turned to his face to Miguel. “He said—”

Lips pressed into his, and Robby froze.

He breathed slowly through his nose, not daring to move. He couldn’t believe it—his mind stuck on a endless loop of *Miguel is kissing me*. His lips were unbelievably soft and a little wet around the corner, like he’d licked them before leaning in.

Miguel pulled back suddenly, his forehead screwed tight.

“Will you do something? Because you’re just sitting there, not doing anything, and I’m starting to feel really—”

Robby surged forward and pressed their lips together again. His heart swooped when Miguel moaned and cupped his cheek, licking into his mouth. He smelled of sweat and cologne, a dizzying mix that made arousal pool in Robby’s gut.

He swirled his tongue around Miguel’s and they continued to kiss, an ebb and flow that moved between them like a tidal wave. Miguel placed a hand on his chest and pushed him down firmly until he was flat on his back. Then, a strong body laid on top of him, arms caging Robby on either side of his head.

This was actually happening.

Robby ran his hands under Miguel's shirt, all along his waistband to the dip of his back, pulling him closer. He rocked his hips upward, shuddering when he felt a hard length against his hip. They continued to kiss, but there was a niggling thought at the back of his mind. It was really hard to ignore. He pulled back, a string of saliva connecting their mouths before breaking apart.

Miguel stared at his lips; his pupils blown, and his gaze unfocused.

“What’s wrong?” Miguel rasped.

Robby exhaled shakily. It was so *good*, but the thought was bothering him. Did he deserve this? After everything that he’d done? He’d spent the last couple of months trying to redeem himself, doing everything that he could for Miguel to forgive him. But was it enough?

Miguel’s eyes darted over his face, waiting. Robby opened his mouth, wanting to say something, anything, but the words wouldn’t come out. Miguel lowered his head.

“Stop it,” Miguel said, nosing at Robby’s cheek. “I can see the gears turning.”

Robby felt himself go weak. He turned his head and caught Miguel in a kiss. This time, his mouth was softer, more gentle.

I’m sorry, he tried to say with his body. *I’m sorry for what I did to you.*

Miguel got the message and kissed him in return, showing just how *okay* things were between them. This is how they made out for a while, taking comfort in each other, putting their worries to rest.

Until Miguel’s hand wormed its way between his legs, and Robby’s mind went blank.

Chapter 19

Two months later...

“Are you ready?” Miguel asked him.

“Yeah,” Robby said, his eyes scanning Miguel’s face. “Are you?”

Miguel nodded. Robby took a deep breath, steeled himself and climbed out of the car. The smell of evergreen hit him as soon as his feet touched the ground. The sun cast a glow on the horizon, and in the distance stood the Miyagi-Do dojo.

It was exactly like he remembered it. Mint green walls, dark wooden accents, translucent sliding doors. Robby was flooded with memories of a summer not so long ago, the feeling of a paintbrush between his fingers, the toc-toc of a hammer and the warmth of Mr. LaRusso’s voice.

Mr. LaRusso.

He’d hardly slept the night before, too nervous at the prospect of meeting his old Sensei again. What if he was still angry with Robby about the school fight? What if he didn’t want to see him again? Robby should have called him, should have explained himself before coming here.

A shoulder pressed against him, jostling him out of his thoughts.

“Hey, it’s all going to be okay,” Miguel said. He brushed his hand against Robby’s. “I’m here with you.”

Robby leaned into him, gathering strength. After a few moments, he straightened up and squared his shoulders. They walked together across the front lawn, up the step and to the sliding door. It seemed like the lesson had already started, Johnny’s voice drifting in and out mingling among the students.

Miguel checked with him one last time. Robby dipped his head.

“Here we go,” Miguel said under his breath.

And then he pulled the door open.

The moment they stepped inside, all the voices died down. The students were scattered around the room in pairs; they all turned to stare at the newcomers.

Robby swallowed, his eyes drawn to the two figures at the front of the class: one dark-haired, one blonde. Side by side, they stood like two opposing forces, the yin and yang of karate. Miguel moved first, and Robby followed on auto-pilot. The students parted to make way for them. Robby noticed Sam in the corner of his eye, but didn’t acknowledge her.

They stopped in front of the two Senseis and snapped into position, feet a shoulder’s width apart, hands behind their backs. Then, they waited. Robby’s palms were sweaty, and his mouth dry. Until now he’d done a good job at avoiding Mr. LaRusso’s gaze. He spared a glance at him.

The man had a soft look on his face.

“Welcome back,” Mr. LaRusso told them, before focusing on Robby. “I didn’t expect to see you both here.”

He was waiting for one of them to say something. Miguel opened his mouth, ready to answer, but Robby beat him to it.

“I’m sorry,” Robby blurted out, before lowering his voice. “I should have told you. I should have called you and told you we were coming. And apologized for what happened...” He didn’t want to get into detail in front of the students. He felt his face go red, as he whispered, “I’m sorry, and I hope you can forgive me.”

He dropped his gaze to the floor, flushing even more.

There was a long silence during which Mr. LaRusso took in his words. Robby waited, his nerves on edge. Then, the sound of footsteps as Mr. LaRusso approached him.

When he spoke, his voice was low and intimate.

“I forgave you a long time ago, Robby. I just wish you’d come to me sooner.” Robby’s chest tightened. He knew he’d messed up, he should have called, he should have— “But... from what Johnny has told me, you’ve more than made up for it.”

What?

Robby raised his head, eyes searching until they connected with Johnny. His dad gave him a subtle wink, and Robby’s throat went tight.

“Class,” Mr. LaRusso said, turning to the kids. “We have two new students: Miguel Diaz and Robby Keene. I hope you all give these two boys the warm welcome they deserve.”

Johnny smiled at Mr. LaRusso, looking ten years younger, before schooling his face into a hard expression.

“Okay, everyone,” he said. “Let’s begin!”

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